

'52 Army tests had biological agents in open air

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a four-part series of articles examining a former Army program of large-scale, open-air biological warfare testing. Some of that testing occurred at Fort McClellan.

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Pneumonia cases increased by 240 percent in Calhoun County in 1952, the same year the Army conducted 12 open-air biological warfare tests at Fort McClellan using bacteria which can cause pneumonia, government documents The Star obtained recently show.

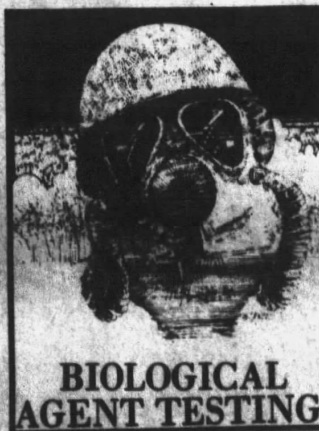
And while the relationship between the tests and the pneumonia cases has not been scientifically established, the Army conducted the tests despite debate within its biological warfare command over the safety of the bacteria.

Before the McClellan tests one top Army officer tried to cancel all open-air field exercises which used this

bacteria near populated areas. He took the action because of the possibility earlier open-air tests in California might have killed one civilian and injured 10 others in San Francisco.

That death has triggered a \$300,000 lawsuit against the government now in the courts in San Francisco. Documents supporting the suit reveal Army scientists knew the bacteria they used in the McClellan tests was potentially dangerous. But those scientists advocated its continued use because they felt, in the words of one, "It is justifiable to take a reasonable calculated risk" when testing biological warfare agents.

The McClellan tests involved spraying bacteria into the air from aircraft, exploding dozens of bacteria-filled bombs and dispersing clouds of bacteria through powerful generators, according to previously classified government documents released after The Star filed Freedom of Information Act requests earlier this year.



Some of the McClellan tests occurred at Pelham Range, northwest of Anniston. Other tests were in the "Choctolocco Corridor," a narrow strip of land connecting the eastern half of the fort with Talladega Na-

tional Forest. Additional tests were conducted on the main fort complex, and included two tests where bacteria were sprayed into the air less than a mile from McClellan Boulevard during morning traffic on that highway.

There is no conclusive evidence the tests caused the increase in reported pneumonia cases. There was a statewide increase in those cases in Alabama in 1952. That Calhoun County had a major increase during the year the Army tests occurred could be a coincidence.

But the Calhoun County increases were significantly above those recorded statewide. The year after the Army tests, the pneumonia cases reported in Calhoun County dropped to a number approximately equal to what they had been a year before the tests, and what they would be for the three years after the tests.

The county reported 98 cases of pneumonia in 1951, said Dr. Thomas Chester of the Alabama Bureau of

Personal Health Services. In 1952, the year of the tests, that total climbed to 333 reported pneumonia cases, an increase of 240 percent. The next year, 1953, there were 139 cases. In 1954, only 114 cases were reported and in 1955 the number reported was again 139, he said. Twenty-nine of the 1952 cases reported in the county resulted in deaths.

Described another way, Chester said that in 1951, Calhoun County had 4.6 percent of all statewide reported pneumonia cases. In 1952, the year of the tests, the county had 12.3 percent of all reported pneumonia cases in Alabama.

In 1953, the county's share of the state total dropped back to 4 percent. In 1954, Calhoun had 3.9 percent of the state's total, and in 1955 the county had 4.6 percent of the state's pneumonia case.

There were several flu and influenza outbreaks in the 1950s in Alabama, Chester said. The number of

pneumonia cases reported statewide did increase from 1951 to 1952. In 1951 Alabama reported 2,127 pneumonia cases. The next year that increased almost 28 percent to 2,716 cases. But that increase was less than that reported the same year in Calhoun County.

In 1953, when there was no testing, the statewide total continued to increase. But Calhoun County's totals dropped by more than 58 percent to a level approximately equal to what would be reported in the other four years between 1951 and 1955.

The Army apparently made no effort at the time to determine if its testing was responsible for the increased pneumonia rates. In 1977 congressional hearings to examine the Army's biological testing program, Brig. Gen. William S. Augerson was asked if Army personnel had monitored the Calhoun County pneumonia outbreaks to determine if they

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1952 tests

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had been caused by the McClellan tests. Augerson, the Army's assistant surgeon general for research and development, said no monitoring occurred.

Army personnel now at McClellan's Chemical School, an organization which participated in the 1952 tests, are also unable to shed light on any connection between the tests and the pneumonia cases. None of the officers now at the Chemical School was present during the 1952 tests.

Until informed by The Star, they said they weren't even aware the tests had occurred.

But the records show there were two major field exercises at McClellan in 1952. Involving several separate tests, they were known by the secret codenames "Shorthorn I and II."

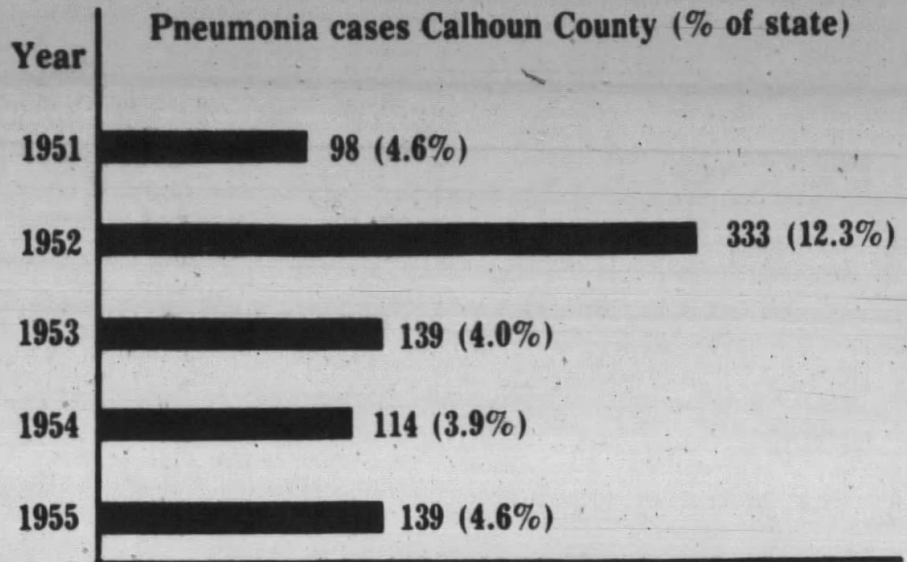
According to a 1953 Army report, declassified at The Star's request, the tests were conducted between July 16 and Sept. 28, 1952.

"Their objective was to determine some potentialities of the tactical use of biological warfare," the report says.

There were two organisms used in the tests. The first was *Serratia marcescens* (SM) and the second was *Bacillus globigii* (BG).

A 1952 Army manual on biological warfare, in use at Fort McClellan's Chemical School then, describes SM bacteria as "vegetable non-sporulating organism(s)," and BG as "spore-forming rod-shaped bacterium."

In 1952, BG was considered



harmless. As recently as 1970, the Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service reapproved use of BG for open-air tests. The 1977 hearings emphasized BG is still believed harmless.

At the time of the California tests in 1950, most medical evidence also suggested SM was essentially harmless. But after those tests, debate began on whether that was a correct assessment of the bacteria.

By 1969, according to 1977 congressional testimony, the military officially recognized SM had "limited pathogenic (disease causing) capability and should not be used for study of experimental infections in man . . . (it is) an opportunist, producing disease if man is exposed to large doses and— or when the body defenses are weak-

ened by debilitary disease, drug abuse or antibiotics."

That congressional testimony indicated young, healthy soldiers probably would not be infected by SM. But infection leading to pneumonia was a possibility if SM was sprayed near a hospital or over a general population containing unhealthy, very young or very old persons.

But while SM was officially discontinued from most use in 1969, serious warning signs about its potential pathogenic qualities were being raised as far back at the 1950 California open-air tests. The possibility the Army was using a potentially pathogenic bacteria was clearly known, if discounted, at the time of the 1952 Fort McClellan tests.

Next: The California tests.